

AFTERIMAGE: MARGUERITE DURAS

interview OLGA MEDVEDKOVA *photographs* LISE SARFATI

I ended up in her apartment by chance. In any event, it was not really important. I did it in memory of photos I used to take when I was thirteen. At that time, my mother used to take me to visit old ladies in Nice, which is a despicable city of old ladies, and one I detest. My mother had tea and chatted with them. She was quite fond of them, those dying old women.

Were you also fond of them?

No. Actually I never understood why my mother would drag me to visit them.

Nevertheless, this is when you started making photographs, isn't it?

Yes.

What did you photograph at that time?

For a start, the old ladies, when they were still alive. But later, my mother and I always used to return to visit their apartments after they had died. And there I would make photographs of everything that was left: the bed, the table, the kitchen, objects. But above all the bed.

Have you kept these photos?

Yes. They are like antiques to me.

When you were taking these pictures, were you thinking of memory and that sort of thing?

I used to think of nothing but getting out of the place. One of the ways to do this was to take pictures of it.

However, no one obliged you to enter Marguerite Duras's apartment after her death.

Well, in a way, yes. It was no longer my mother, but my father. At the time I was making these pictures, my father was dying of cancer in Nice. From Duras's apartment, I would go to Nice to see my father, then I would return to continue photographing the apartment.

In the end, does Marguerite Duras have anything to do with this story?

Yes, she does, because she died just before my father died. And because the feeling of his impending death stirred inside me this sort of analytical machine that clung to the tiny signs of presence, to a kind of unpleasant curiosity born out of powerlessness, to a kind of archeological compulsion, which made me read a "text" that no one had ever written and that was Marguerite Duras's apartment.

Could this have been any other apartment, any other "postmortem inventory"?

You are now dragging me into an ambiguity that I'll never be able to clear up. Because it just happened like that. The "Duras" case was just an example, but it was exemplary because of her public notoriety, because it dragged everybody into this "post factum" curiosity machine. I, therefore, tried to decipher what seemed to me signs or rather constellations of signs.

Are you talking about objects?

Rather of arrangements of objects, of connections. I finally realized that everything in her apartment was determined by a bare and precise logic.

Do you believe that this logic was apparent while she was alive?

It looks to me like the logic of absence.

—Translated by Nicolas Jasson



The logic of absence: Images of French writer Marguerite Duras's quarters in her country house in Neauphle-le-Château, a small town some twenty-five miles due east of Paris, taken after her death. In our text, Lise Safati is speaking of the Duras apartment in Paris, on rue Saint-Benoît, which she also documented.